

3rd October 2006 – Visit to Highgrove

We knew that the day would be special when we spied a rainbow as the coach sped through the Gloucestershire lanes – was the end of this rainbow really in Highgrove? Speak to any member of the group who entered Prince Charles' private gardens and you will receive an enthusiastic description of our recent once-in-a-lifetime adventure. We were expecting inspired plantings, a magnificent vegetable garden and examples of cutting edge garden design. Yes these were all in evidence but here was also a much-loved garden, very much 'owned' by His Royal Highness who knows every ounce of the soil and has probably worked most of the earth himself. Walking round you began to get a special insight to the Prince himself.

What made it so significant – well, where do I start? Perhaps with Bernard, our guide who had been drafted in at the last minute as our scheduled guide had 'trouble with her horse!' (it could only happen at Highgrove!) A character worthy of his own article but here a supporting actor to the star of the drama – the garden, itself. Bernard gently guided us around most of the many acres, barely pausing for breath for two hours as the stories kept tumbling out.

Of course we had to use our imagination at times – the cottage garden and the wild flower meadow had shown their glories for this year and we could only imagine the summer profusion of flowers and spring carpets of daffodils and later, blue camassia..

So, follow me, - enter the Box Garden with its centre-piece of a gigantic terracotta pot surrounded by undulating waves of box, kept in check by students on their gap-year. Admire the stone carvings by students from the Prince's Foundation as you walk down a cobbled path through the laurel tunnel. Pass the hostas and ferns (kept healthy and snail/slug free by the Highgrove army of hedgehogs) and find one of the many ornate stone seats – this one made from pieces found in a reclamation yard by garden designers Julian and Isabel Bannerman. Later you will see a 10ft high glass pyramid designed by the Bannermans and filled with hardy ferns! Pause by the Fountain garden and look at the coi carp whose parents were given to the Prince as a birthday present by Sir Yehudi Menuhin. Try not to envy the fruit and vegetables still growing profusely in the walled garden and enjoyed by the Prince wherever he happens to be as the fine produce always accompanies him wherever he goes! Smile with affection as you listen to the reason for the centre-piece of the walled garden – a fine Italian fountain, now in need of repair but left in its sorry state as the birds like to use the moss which covers it! Regard with awe the tree ferns happily forgetting their Tasmanian home and flourishing in the Southern Hemisphere garden.

I hope these impressions give you a 'feel' for this exceptional garden. I haven't even mentioned the very special Sanctuary built to commemorate the Millennium and blessed by the Bishop of London, containing icons we could only imagine, the Tree House blown down by storms but re-built following protestations from the princes who happily played there when much younger, the 'Wall of Gifts' – a woven carpet of stone – built around samples of work by students on masonry courses. Then there is the mysterious Stumpery – a wild mass of tree stumps embedded with tangled ferns and hellebores forming a secret enclosure originally for hostas and guarded by the Goddess of the Woods made by David Wynne. (The hellebore worn as a button-hole by the Prince at his wedding to Camilla came from this garden.) A pair of Green oak temples containing memorabilia add interest particularly the leprechauns sent from Ireland by a White witch!

Advice from notable characters rings in your ears – Rosemary Verey, Sir Roy Strong, the Marchioness of Salisbury, Miriam Rothschild but the end-result is a very unique garden, very much the creation of the Prince himself.

There isn't the space here to mention the wild-life - the black bees, the lesser spotted woodpeckers, the kingfishers, the mallards whose ducklings attempt Kamikaze when they jump from their 12 ft high nest atop a water feature, the black Hebridean sheep that jump and what was that about organic gardening? Yet another story worth telling in the future!